

First Presbyterian Church, Concord, NC
28 October 2018
Charlotte, NC

Psalm 44: 1-3, 23-26
Mark 4:35-41

On the water

People who make their living, or who recreate, on large bodies of water know that the end of the day is the worst time to set sail. The morning is typically much better weather-wise because the atmosphere settles over night. But as the sun rises and crosses the sky, it heats the air, land and water and this creates currents of air, which in turn agitates the water.

You've been to the beach.....it wasn't that long ago.....how many times have you set your chair at the edge of the water, pleasant waves lapping at your feet in the morning, and by the end of day the wind is blowing, the kids are body-surfing and you are having to hold onto the umbrellas.

Our family returns to Pine Knoll Shores on the North Carolina coast annually during August. And just as I described, the mornings are pleasant, and as the day stretches towards sundown the winds increase and the water turns to foam, and even if you don't have a watch you know when it's time to go in and get dressed and head to Amos Mosquitoes for dinner.

Jesus' day at the beach

Our story today starts with Jesus and the disciples AT THE BEACH! Jesus is in a fishing boat, preaching to the crowds who have gathered on the shore. But as the day wanes Jesus tells the disciples he wants to cross to the other side the Sea of Galilee.

Now, a number of Jesus' disciples made their living as fishermen. They know all too well the dangers of the sea. This is not a good time to set out from shore into open water..... but they honor Jesus' request nonetheless.

Mark includes a curious detail in the telling of this story: he describes "they took him....just as he was". This is the sort of detail that Mark rarely includes in his stories. The description gives us a sense of urgency among the disciples, like "let's get the show on the road and get out of here".

Fishing with my father

My father liked to fish, and he knew a thing or two about the open water. We lived in New Orleans where there is plenty of water. When I was young we'd take out of Empire near the mouth of the Mississippi, through English Bayou and into the Gulf of Mexico to tie up to an oil rig and fish for flounder. There were times I was terrified in our little 18' Grady White boat, waves breaking over the bow at the end of the day headed back in to the launch.

There was one day in particular when the weather deteriorated quickly. I remember scanning the horizon for other boats so I would know in which direction to swim if we were swamped. We made it back to the safety of the breakwater.... And I look back now and feel I didn't give my dad enough credit..... not being unnerved by the situation.

In short, I didn't have enough faith in my father.

The disciples, it seems, did not have enough faith in Jesus, either. There is a good chance that Jesus was well aware of the possible danger and he just didn't say anything. Maybe Jesus wasn't above needing a little excitement, and wasn't always about the business.... He was human....a little adrenaline rush can be good for the soul.

Disciples' Extreme Experience

But I think it is safe to say that Jesus' disciples were not thinking about an adrenaline rush, though. They were just trying to be faithful, **but it did not seem to be working out so well!**

Now, if the disciples didn't have any angst about the voyage when they set out, before the night is done they are in full-blown terror.

Because a storm arose. They were taking on water and doing what they could not to be swamped. All the while, according to scripture, Jesus is resting peacefully in the back of the boat asleep on a cushion. He must have been tired not to be woken by the ferocity of the storm. All that preaching and teaching had wore him out. (All of us preachers take serious naps in the afternoon.

They have to wake Jesus up. "Don't you care that we are perishing?" they ask.

Prayers of Desperation

Now, not all of us have spent time on the water, but we have all prayed. And there's a good bet that all of us have asked in our prayers at some point in our lives, "God, do you hear me?" "Are you asleep?" "Do you see what's going on in my life?" "And don't you care?"

If you have, you have good company!

The Psalmist ask in the 44th Psalm:

God, rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?

Awake, do not cast us off forever.

Why do you hide your face?

Have you forgotten our affliction?

For we sink down to the earth and our hearts are low to the ground.

Rise up, O Lord; come to our aid.

Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

And the disciples ask, “Teacher, do you care that we are perishing?” That we are afraid?

And you and I ask: “Lord, do you hear MY prayers?”

- My prayers.....about my job.....the one I hate.....the one that under-employs me....about the one I wish I had?
- My prayer.....about my marriage.....the one I wish I had.....the one I had in mind when I said, “I do.”the one I have that could be better.
- My prayers.....about my children, and my grandchildren, and about the world we are passing on to them, and about our country I and others have fought so hard to preserve and seems to be turning on itself.
- My prayers.....about the addiction I can’t seem to admit, the depression I refuse to acknowledge, the over commitment that zaps all the fun out of my days, dwindling finances, failing health....
- O Lord, do you hear my prayers about how lonely I am?

And Jesus even prayed, in Matthew it is written that, “Jesus went a little further and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me.’”

And from the cross Jesus cried, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

These words of Jesus, as much as anything for me personally, convinces me that Jesus knows what its like to pray and wonder how the prayer will be answered.

Of course, God the Father did hear Jesus’ prayers, and did not forsake him.

He has heard the prayers of His children throughout time:

- Abraham and Sara’s prayers about being childless

- Joseph's prayers about being abandoned by his brothers, being wrongly accused of a crime, and ultimately being reunited with his father.
- Moses' prayers about how to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, through Red Sea and survive in the wilderness
- David's prayers about taking on Goliath, assuming the leadership of Israel and all the ups and downs of his life
- Jonah's prayers before and after being swallowed by the whale, and his hates and hopes for the people of Ninevah
- Job's prayers on the dung heap
- Daniel's prayers in the lion's den
- And then there are all the people in the gospels who come to Jesus prayerfully, and not one of them is turned away. They came to be healed of their illness and got saved from their sins, too, in the process, which was what Jesus was more concerned about.

Peace

"Peace, Be Still" Jesus said, and the wind and the waves ceased to threaten the boat; and the disciples were filled with awe.

But I also can't help but wonder if those words weren't directed at the disciples as much or more than to the wind and the waves.

Peace. Be still. Have you still no faith? Why are you afraid?

"And then there was calm."

Notice, the disciples are still in the boat. The boat is still out at sea, exposed in open water. And Jesus is with them. They are not magically transported to the safety of a larger boat or immediately to shore.

They are still at sea with the same threatening elements surrounding them as before.

But instead of fear, angst and terror - there is calm.

How God chooses to answer our prayers is sometimes crystal clear and at other times a complete mystery. In all of my years of praying prayers I have never been magically transported to a place other than where I was. Few, if any, of my prayers are answered in a way I imagined. But answered they were.

Linda

Years ago a woman in my congregation named Linda had cancer. It is safe to say, because she said it herself, that prior to the illness she was a person of marginal faith and an adrenaline junkie.

But after the diagnosis she became, let's call her a "prayer junkie". And Linda was saved..... Physically healed and spiritually healed. She became cancer-free.....And she accepted Christ as her Savior.

Over that time her faith strengthened. Her praying never abated. She became very involved in her community of faith and worshipped every time the doors of the church were open. She did not forget where she had come from, and who she had become once the storm of her illness had passed.

But five years later the illness returned.

And Linda believed that God healed her of cancer once he could do it again. She would not give up the fight. Her tenacious faith kept her alive as her body withered.

So when I went to visit her and held her well-worn, highlighted Bible in my hands, I prayed and asked God what to say to her and opened the Bible with my thumb.

The passage my eyes fell upon was the story of the paralytic being dropped through the roof in front of Jesus and Jesus telling him he was saved from his sins, and then telling him to get up and walk. I read the passage and then said to "Linda, you are healed. Five years ago Jesus healed you to show you he is also saving you. You are healed from your sins and are saved for eternity."

And there was calm.

We were still in the hospital room. Cancer was still killing her. And Jesus was there, too. Not asleep, but well aware of what was going on.

Peace. Be still.

The emotional storm that was raging just moments ago in Linda was now gone.

No more fear. A lot more faith. And calm.

Linda passed away the next day, with her family at her side, at as much peace as she had ever experienced before.

Everyone's prayers had been answered.

Not in exactly the way they had imagined or prayed and hoped for.

But answered as only God in Jesus Christ can answer our prayers.....

They were filled with awe.

And there was calm. And peace!

Amen.